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ABSTRACT

Tools for teaching students how to question intelligently are badly needed. Science fiction provides many such tools in a variety of subjects by stimulating the imagination and thus motivating students to learn. Such vehicles are available at all grade levels. From Mark Twain and H.G. Wells to Anne McCaffrey and Isaac Asimov, novels and short stories provide the grist for discussion in such subjects as psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, English composition, and science. Genre films and television shows can also be used to provide reading motivation and subject area content. This paper provides examples of how librarians and teachers can use a wide range of science fiction materials as teaching aids. (Contains a 110-item list of individual works, literature series, individual films, and television series cited.) (Author/RS)

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Science Fiction: Popular Culture as Reading and Learning Motivation

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ABSTRACT

Tools for teaching students how to question intelligently are badly needed. Science fiction provides many such tools in a variety of subjects by stimulating the imagination and thus motivating students to learn. Such vehicles are available at all grade levels. From Mark Twain and H.G. Wells to Anne McCaffrey and Isaac Asimov, novels and short stories provide the grist for discussion in such subjects as Psychology, History, Sociology, Anthropology, English Composition, and Science. Genre films and television shows can also be used to provide reading motivation and subject area content. This article provides examples of how librarians and teachers can utilize a wide range of science fiction materials as teaching aids.

In The Ascent of Man Jacob Bronowski wrote, "It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it" (Bronowski 360). Science Fiction (popularly called SF) helps teachers and librarians provide the tools that enable students to question intelligently by stimulating the imagination and thus motivating them to learn. This article will discuss just some of the many Science Fiction works (for the purpose of this discussion, defined as including the sub-genres of fantasy and horror) that can be used at the various education levels.

Mark Twain, who was honored as "Dead Guest of Honor" at the 1993 World Science Fiction Convention in San Francisco, provided one such tool in this book, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Written in 1889, it may be both the first time travel and alternate history story. This great American writer is not alone in having written material in a genre which for years many academicians claimed was "not literature." Nor was Twain alone. Among the other "classic" writers who have written Science Fiction stories are:

Anonymous	Beowulf (fantasy)
Charles Dickens	A Christmas Carol (ghost story)
Oscar Wilde	The Canterville Ghost (ghost story)
Sir Thomas More	Utopia (utopian)
Jonathan Swift	Gulliver's Travels (fantasy)
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (supernatural)
Sir James Barrie	Peter Pan (fantasy)

Even William Shakespeare used Science Fiction elements; the ghost of Hamlet's father and the witches in Macbeth being two examples. There are many more. Modern "mainstream" authors such as these have also contributed to SF's growing canon:

Nevil Chute	On the Beach (apocalypse)
Kurt Vonnegut	Player Piano (dystopia)
Margaret Atwood	The Handmaid's Tale (apocalypse)
Richard Adams	Watership Down (fantasy)

Writers who were not SF authors when they were writing have had certain of their works identified with the genre. Who hasn't identified these titles as Science Fiction?:

Bram Stoker	Dracula
Mary Shelley	Frankenstein
Aldous Huxley	Brave New World
Gaston Leroux	The Phantom of the Opera
George Orwell	1984
Edgar Allan Poe	The Masque of the Red Death
Robert Louis Stevenson	The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Others, such as Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and H.P. Lovecraft, have become identified with the genre for the totality of their works.

What does all this mean to a teacher or librarian? It means that Science Fiction has an historic legacy and legitimacy. Legitimacy did not suddenly appear when Madeleine L'Engle won the Newbery medal for A Wrinkle in Time in 1963, or Lloyd Alexander for The High King in 1969, or Robert C. O'Brien for Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH in 1972. Acceptance has come because there is a wealth of truly fine material from which to choose. But first teachers and librarians must get over the idea that Science Fiction is "not really literature." It can be done. When I worked at The Bronx High School of Science, there was an English teacher whose short story assignment included a reading list on which there was no Science Fiction. I asked him about it. His answer: "Science Fiction is not literature." To try to change his mind - no easy task - I handed him Harlan Ellison's collection Shatterday

and asked him if, as a favor to me, he would read it. He agreed. When he brought the book back, I asked him his opinion. He said the stories were "pretty good" - high praise from someone who doesn't think much of most of this century's authors. The result was an agreement that he would allow his students to use any Science Fiction story that I recommended or approved. Well, it was a start - and over the years I built on it. Science Fiction fans often quote Sturgeon's Law (attributed to author Theodore Sturgeon): "Ninety percent of everything is crap." All genres are literature. All have crap as well as some truly excellent works.

Science Fiction is perhaps the victim of the pulp magazines of the 1940s and '50s, and the grade-B and lower films of the '50s, including, unfortunately, the film often voted by critics the worst ever made, Ed Wood's Plan 9 From Outer Space. But there were good films during this period of which teachers can make much use. One in particular, 1951's The Day the Earth Stood Still, with its peace-seeking alien and concerns about our future use of nuclear weapons, provides an excellent basis for discussions in Philosophy, Sociology, and Science classes of tolerance, the arms race, war and peace, mankind's relationships with itself and the universe, and the concepts of space travel and life on other worlds. The film and the story upon which it is based, "Farewell to the Master" by Harry Bates, could be used in English or film classes to analyze adaptation from one medium to another and similarities and differences in the mediums. Other possibilities are Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and its source, Philip K. Dick's Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep?, and Francois Truffaut's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's novel Fahrenheit 451.

A boon to history classes is the increase in the number of alternate history stories over the past few years. Such anthologies as the two volume What Might Have Been series edited by Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg and the collections Alternate Presidents and Alternate Kennedys, both edited by Mike Resnick, have contributed to this phenomenon. These stories open marvelous possibilities for students to do research on the actual events to which the stories are positing alternatives. Discussions allow them to analyze the real and alternate events and their historical consequences. Novels can also be given the same treatment. Jerry Yulsman's Elleander Morning, asks the question "what if Hitler had been killed before he came to power?" Harry Turtledove's The Guns of the South postulates a Confederate victory in the Civil War. The ramifications of such drastic changes in history - and the possibilities for student exploration - are fascinating. George Santayana noted that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Bartlett 588). What better way to teach these lessons?

One device for setting up an alternate history story is the one Twain used in A Connecticut Yankee: time travel. Novels such as H.G. Wells' classic The Time Machine, Time After Time by Karl Alexander (in which Wells battles Jack the Ripper in modern-day San Francisco), and Jack Finney's Time and Again (in which a time travel project takes the protagonist to 1880's New York City) use different methods of traveling through time. A Physics class could have some lively debates as to which, if any, is the best method, in the course of which various laws of Physics could be explored (and no, not all time travel books have the word time in their titles -

witness A Connecticut Yankee).

In her article "Using Science Fiction to Teach the Psychology of Sex and Gender," Hilary M. Lips discusses how she uses Ursula K. LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness and Marge Piercy's Woman at the Edge of Time to "illustrate the links between a society's assumptions about gender and its practices" (Lips 197). Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 utopian novel Herland, with its tale of two men who stumble onto an all-female society, also provides a vehicle for discussion by Psychology and/or Sociology classes of sex, gender, and male-female relationships. Similarly, those same classes could use Robert Silverberg's Dying Inside as an excellent springboard for studying loss; not only the loss of his ESP powers by protagonist David Selig, but the various kinds of loss we all experience in our own lives.

Controversial issues are discussed at almost every level of education and in many different courses. Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 (one of the few SF novels to consistently appear on reading lists) deals with a society in which books have been banned and the dissenters who have memorized their contents so they will not be lost forever. Could there be a better basis for a unit on censorship and/or oppression? Norman Spinrad's Pictures at 11, with its tale of the takeover of a local Los Angeles television station by "ecoterrorists," provides an excellent starting point for discussions of terrorism, the environment, and the role of the media in our society today. The Foundation Trilogy by Isaac Asimov, voted the best Science Fiction series of all time, introduced the concept of "psychohistory." Along with its more recent sequels, its variety of tales and characters provides material for History, Psychology,

Sociology, and Anthropology classes.

As mentioned earlier, the printed page is not the only possible source. The TV show Babylon 5 episode "Gropos" provides an excellent basis for a discussion of the true horror of war: the loss of friends and loved ones, as well as the effect going into battle has on both soldiers and those they leave behind. The Twilight Zone episode "Eye of the Beholder," in which surgeons attempt to "improve" the looks of a supposedly "ugly" girl so that she can live among "normal people," provides one of the best beginnings possible for a discussion of the question "what is beauty?" Likewise, an examination of conformity, rebellion, and individuality can begin with the episode "Number 12 Looks Just Like You," a story in which a young woman tries to reject treatments that will make her physically flawless but look like everyone else. The Star Trek episode "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" opens the door to considerations of the destructive power of racism. In the episode "Amok Time," the character T'Pau asks Mr. Spock, "Are thee Vulcan or are thee human?" Spock's need to answer this question provides great fodder for any Psychology class. It also allows students to delve into something we all have experienced at one time or another: the feeling of being an outsider and not knowing who we are or where we fit in. Elementary school students, especially, need to understand that they are not alone in having such feelings. Indeed, Star Trek episodes have dealt with so many social issues that they can be and are the basis for entire courses.

Needless to say, any and all of the works mentioned here can be used in English classes to teach the elements of fiction writing. Any genre could be used to

do this, but SF brings in the ingredient of imagination. The possibilities inherent in just the two words "what if" provide a wealth of topics for composition, creative writing, speech, film, and literature classes. The challenge of creating an entirely new world can be a byproduct of reading such series as Dragonriders of Pern or Harper of Pern, both by Anne McCaffrey, the first Science Fiction author to make The New York Times best seller list. Ursula K. LeGuin's Earthsea, Larry Niven's Ringworld, or J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth in Lord of the Rings are other examples. The Star Wars films, whose appeal has so recently been reinforced in such a big way, provide worldbuilding stimuli as well as an excellent basis for teaching elementary school students such values as loyalty, honor, fighting for what you believe in, and (most obviously) the difference between good and evil (and how resisting evil can result in good). Even that overworked concept of "The Force" can teach children the value of looking within yourself and using the strength found there. In an era that is stressing the teaching of "values," these perennially popular Science Fiction films can be a valuable tool.

It is a given that the science postulated in Science Fiction can be a source of lessons and discussions in Science classes. Issues of feasibility of everything from Star Trek's warp drive and transporter to the possible existence of an E.T. open vistas to students that mere pedagogy would not tap. For example, Ernest Callenbach's novel Ecotopia, which postulates a society in which ecological concerns are paramount, can be the basis for an entire unit on ecology as well as an analysis of the society the author has created - an excellent opportunity for interdisciplinary

assignments between the Science and Anthropology departments. Brave New World allows for the exploration of scientific ethics and that current "hot topic," cloning. Indeed, ethics in general can be a topic found in many SF stories. Karen Haber's Mutant series opens the door to studying not only the scientific reality of such powers as ESP and telekinesis, but also the ethical aspects of their use - another chance for cross-disciplinary teaching between the Science, Psychology, and Sociology departments. There's even a book that teachers can use to begin relating the science fact and the Science Fiction: The Physics of Star Trek by Lawrence M. Krauss.

At the Intermediate School where I worked, students' reading problems, of course, impacted their other subjects, including Science. The seventh grade Science teacher and I were talking about problems he was having teaching his students astronomy. Knowing that he was a Star Trek fan, I suggested the possibility of using the show. We hit upon the idea of having the students write their own story, which we would stage and videotape. A requirement was that they would first have to demonstrate enough knowledge of astronomy to incorporate this information into the script. The students went for it in a big way. I shall never forget the point in their writing where they needed an exotic-sounding flower to use for comparison as part of a story point. Since they were in the library at the time, everyone ran for the encyclopedias and the flower books to find the best name - and they did. When they completed their script, we produced it. The students did all the work and, of course, acted the roles. We created a 15-minute videocassette, complete with music, titles, and credits, which became part of the library's audio-visual collection. We even sent

a copy to Gene Roddenberry, the show's creator, receiving a very nice acknowledgement in return. The assignment provided the students with more than just a means of learning astronomy. It added to their self-esteem. In addition, the project's needs allowed them to practice a number of skills: storyboarding, writing, editing, basic videotaping, working cooperatively, and of course, reading.

And if there is anything librarians and teachers should be doing, it is encouraging reading at every opportunity and in every way possible. I utilized a number of techniques to do so. One is a habit I still maintain to this day: each week I sit down with TV Guide and look for any tie-ins between upcoming television shows and the books or stories on which they are based. From Dr. Seuss to Stephen King, Dickens to Roald Dahl, Garfield and Peanuts to the star of what is now the second most successful motion picture in history, E.T. (Star Wars is once again the first); I have used them all by creating reading lists and displays. It works. The books go out. Adding the telecasting of movies increases the pool of materials since a lot of Science Fiction films are based on short stories and novels. Two examples of short stories are "The Sentinel" by Arthur C. Clarke (which became 2001: A Space Odyssey) and "Who Goes There?" by John W. Campbell, Jr. (which became The Thing). The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury; The Black Cauldron by Lloyd Alexander; Pierre Boulé's Planet of the Apes; Psycho by Robert Bloch; and Michael Crichton's Andromeda Strain and, most recently, a "little film" called Jurassic Park, are among the novels - and let us not forget the transformation of Shakespeare's The Tempest into the Science Fiction classic Forbidden Planet.

Novelizations of popular movies and television shows can provide the same "recognition factor" for motivating students to read. A caveat: Sturgeon's law really applies here; the number of really bad books is extremely high in this format. For every well-done version like Fantastic Voyage by Isaac Asimov or George Lucas' Star Wars, there are a lot of awful rip-offs. Prime examples of both are found in that previously mentioned perpetual motion machine called Star Trek. The original show and its three successors, The Next Generation, Deep Space Nine, and Voyager, have seen their characters spun off into dozens of original novels. Authors such as Hugo award winners Joe Haldeman and Vonda McIntyre have contributed to these ongoing series. Some have been very good. Others have been awful. But students will read them. The librarian's job is to try to provide the good ones while filtering out the bad just as s(he) would with any other books. But the effort can be worth it. I had a student in the remedial reading program who, having not done any of his previously assigned book reports, had been told by his English teacher that he had to turn in the next one "or else." His challenge to me: find something he would like to read. I started by asking my two standard questions: "What do you like? What interests do you have?" His answer: "nothing." I finally found out that he liked to watch Star Trek and asked him if he knew that there were books that contained short story versions of the episodes. His eyes widened - I had him! I gave him James Blish's first collection of stories adapted from the show. He took it out; he read it; he did his book report; he came back for more. He read his way through all the Blish books, then all the other Star Trek books we had, good and bad. Finally, I had to tell him

that he'd read our entire Star Trek collection. Would he trust me to give him something else? He did. By the end of the school year he had begun to branch out into other forms of fiction - and his reading level had appreciably improved. It would not have happened without that one television show - and I've had similar experiences with other Science Fiction series and films.

But SF can be used even earlier. The number of students who've learned to read and love reading thanks to Dr. Seuss is probably incalculable. Jane Yolen's Commander Toad stories also attract young children to the wonderful world of books. Diane Duane's Wizard series, as well as the works of William Sleator, Daniel Pinkwater, and Diana Wynne Jones (among many others) provide a wonderful continuity from those of such earlier lights as Isaac Asimov's Lucky Starr series, Andre Norton, and the "juvenile" novels of Robert Heinlein. Indeed, giving a child a good story is still the best way to instill the love of reading that is so essential to lifelong learning and lifelong success.

What can librarians and teachers do? Many things. Some possibilities:

1. Determine your students' interests. Whether it is an adventure story such as Robert Silverberg's Time of the Great Freeze, a fantasy such as Silverberg's Lord Valentine's Castle, or a sports story such as Michael Bishop's Brittle Innings (in which Frankenstein's monster becomes a baseball player), there is a good chance that there are stories for all ages dealing with that topic within Science Fiction - and these can be incorporated into the learning process.

2. As I mentioned earlier, read TV Guide and the movie listings in

newspapers and magazines. Using what you find there, you can create displays and book lists of titles from which the films and/or TV shows have been adapted. Novelizations; original novels based on the shows (such as the extremely successful Star Trek, Star Wars, and Babylon 5 series); and related non-fiction books can also be included.

3. Lists and displays of non-media based titles can also be created. One means of doing this is to get copies of syllabi or curriculum outlines from instructors. Another is to utilize various "Best Books" and other lists. One such is the New York Public Library's annual Books for the Teen-Aged.

4. Arrange for author visits. This is an especially good time as a project called "Reading for the Future" has just been initiated by SF authors David Brin, Gregory Benford, and Greg Bear to encourage reading, particularly among Junior High School students. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) maintains a speaker's bureau and, although not yet officially affiliated with the project, can still be a resource. Contacting your local Science Fiction clubs (and most cities and towns have them) can be another conduit. Attendance at Science Fiction conventions (and there is one just about every weekend of the year somewhere in the country) provides another means of making such arrangements. This was the means by which I arranged for visits by Anne McCaffrey, Ben Bova, and the late Isaac Asimov. Contacting publishers and trying to "piggyback" on a book tour is another possibility. Lastly, you can take a truly direct approach by attending readings and/or signings at local bookstores and speaking with the authors there or locating addresses

in such sources as Who's Who in America, Contemporary Authors, and Something About the Author.

5. Look for openings to make suggestions to teachers. Suggest alternatives to written papers such as oral presentations and student-created videos. They are often looking for such options.

6. Do book talks as often as possible. Nothing provides a better way to stimulate students than your own enthusiasm about books and stories you truly like, particularly in the elementary grades; enthusiasm is hard to fake and students know it.

Why Science Fiction? Can't we do the same things using other forms of fiction? Perhaps. But not with the same attraction for students. Not with the same provision for a sense of wonder. Not with the same ability to prompt a reader's imagination to soar to other worlds and other (alien) life forms. Not with the same viability for usage in a wide variety of disciplines to teach an array of concepts.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning" (Prothero 1990). We are constantly looking for new ways to reach students; to stimulate and motivate them; to help them find truth and meaning. Science Fiction in all its forms provides many such ways. Teachers and librarians should take advantage of them. We owe it to our students.

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Val Ontell received her MLS from Queens College in New York City in 1970. She has been a librarian in an Intermediate School (12 years) and a High School (8 years), both in New York City. She is currently a librarian at San Diego Mesa College, a Community College in California. Her knowledge of science fiction comes from over twenty years as a fan of the genre, both as a reader and a member of the committees that put on science fiction conventions. She has met many of the authors to whose works she refers in this article. She is proud to call a few her friends.